Thinking with the senses. Review of François Quiviger, the sensory world of the Italian renaissance. John Varriano, tastes and temptation: Food and art in renaissance Italy

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Thinking with the Senses

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François Quiviger, *The Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art* (Reaktion Books: London, 2010), 99 illns. (39 colour), 208 pp., hardback ISBN 978-1861896575, £17.95.

John Varriano, *Tastes and Temptations: Food and Art in Renaissance Italy* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2009), 280 pp., hardback ISBN 9780520259041, £20.95.

Scholars of the early modern period are particularly fortunate in having an abundance of art literature at their disposal. From Alberti's comments concerning perspectival construction to Bellori's conception of painting as Idea, these texts offer a matrix into which art historians can ground, and more importantly qualify their speculations on the intentions and reception of works of art. Too often, however, art theory is exploited to distil visual effects into convenient one word terms – the *grazia* of Raphael's paintings or the *difficoltà* of Michelangelo's working process. To be sure, inquiry into key terms and their function as bridges mediating the circulation in ideas between art theory and the adjacent fields of poetics and rhetoric has yielded illuminated insights. Even so, the risk of this approach is that it can drain works of art of their semantic complexity, reducing them to dry husks of period concepts.

Both books under review may be seen as participating in a broader current to resuscitate the sensuous qualities of works of art in the early modern period, an era frequently equated with the rise of the artist as cerebral intellectual. There are, of course, many precedents for understanding the domains of art and culture not as dry and distant, but as immediate and visceral. One of the first professional art historians, Karl Friedrich von Rumohr (1785–1843), author of *Italienische Forschungen* (1827–31), also wrote the *Geist der Kochkunst* (1822), innovative in seeing cuisine in relation to national culture and education. In the present era of disciplinary and period specialisation, a scholar thinking laterally about culture in terms of art and gastronomy may appear dilettantish (and in fact, von Rumohr is said to have referred to himself as a *Universaldilettant*). Yet, as François Quiviger notes in his study, it would be misguided to neglect the domain of the senses in our understanding of Renaissance thought. A number of anthropological studies, for instance, have argued that the culture of a particular society can be characterised by how it prioritises or censors the operation of the human sensorium. Taking a cue from these approaches, Quiviger examines the role of non-visual sensations in Renaissance theory and art. The first part of his book ('Sensation in Renaissance Mental Imagery') explores how sensation and, more generally, ideas about process of thought penetrated areas such as memory, meditation, the human figure, ornament, and allegory. The second part ('Sensation in Representation') examines how clusters of sensations – sight, touch, smell, sound, taste (the last of these broadly treated in the events of banquets) – came to be represented such that they prompted recognition and reactions by beholders of works of art.

Quiviger's introductory chapter discusses how sensory data were understood to be processed in the mind. Drawing largely from Aristotle's treatise *On the Soul*, early modern thinkers proscribed to the idea that a 'common sense' served as a clearing house of sorts to handle one's perception of the multifaceted sensory impressions. Instead of entertaining in detail how adherents of the Aristotelian view outlined how sensory data circulated in the three ventricles located in the head, Quiviger proceeds in the next chapter to the rapport between the senses and personal habits. A case in point is the *impresa*, or personal devices, esoteric combinations of word and image. Whereas Robert Klein in his important essay on the *impresa* conceived of this personal device as a riddle to be solved by the informed viewer, Quiviger calls our attention to how these *imprese* had concrete use in the form of hat pins, appropriately located near or at the very place where an individual's mental operation was believed to take place.[1] Such *imprese* made frequent reference to the senses in conveying meaning. Those, for instance, conceived by the Renaissance man of letters Paolo Giovio depict biting, stinging, or hairy animals or evoke fragrance through the portrayal of fruit and flowers. Here one wonders whether such *impresa*, given their frequent depiction upon shields, had apotropaic, offensive, or alluring functions for the viewer fortunate enough to decode their locked significance.

Techniques of imagination engaging the sensorium also applied to the focus of Renaissance artists – the depiction of the human body. Quiviger notes that instructions guiding artists how to depict the body broke the organism down to manageable parts which were more often than not sense organs – the eyes, hands, ears, and noses. Artists also placed import upon the body as a whole, referred to as a 'sensitive animate entity' (p. 58), and applied their own awareness of the body to depict and create fictious figures. Bronzino in his musings on the brush playfully compared the act of painting to coitus – 'it's enough to do it facing or from behind, sideways, foreshortened or in perspective, the brush adapts to every position' he quips in his *Capitolo del Pennello*. Here the discussion might have further addressed whether Renaissance artists thought specifically in terms of the senses or whether the larger problem was the convincing animation of the human body via the conglomeration of active sensuous zones.

Lest we think that engagement with the sensorium applied to figural depiction alone, Quiviger next discusses how the senses inform the seemingly marginal domain of ornament. Recent scholarship has argued that ornament functions as a vehicle to invigorate the dialogue between the media of painting, sculpture, and architecture, a dialogue effectively controlled and in some ways constrained by art theoretical debates on the paragone. Quiviger makes an analogous observation in seeing *all'antica* ornament,

largely derived from the grottos of the Domus Aurea, as a mixture of the senses. Geometric, animal, human, monstrous, and decorative forms touch, rub, bit, and speak to one another. Such hybrid forms create the interplay of the sonic and tactile. This mixture of the senses offers a model to understand the revival of antiquity in the Renaissance, not simply as the restitution of forms, but also positing how one engages sensuously with the world.

Quiviger turns in the book's second half to considering how the senses might offer alternative readings in several well-known works of art. For instance, in his discussion on sight, he contends that Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, with its multitude of human figures, conveys the impression of space. Bodies making or hearing loud noises, others embracing, kissing, biting, or being pulled down to join the damned suggest the relative form of location without recourse to the hegemonic system of perspective. But this, I think, raises a larger epistemological question prompted by Michelangelo's fresco. How does one body know or recognise itself or other bodies, especially at the tumultuous moment when God separates his flock?

The discussion concerning bodies' interaction in a mutually shared ambient environment leads to the following chapter on touch, the most insightful in Quiviger's book. Here he works with four loosely distinct aspects of tactility: proprioception, or the awareness of one's own body and coordination; sensation as felt upon the skin's surface; the perception of pain; and lastly, the perception of temperature. Quiviger in a section on 'Interior Touch' sees a manifestation of postural awareness in Dominican and Franciscan devotional practice in which devotees accompanied prayers with the assumption of different postures. Correspondingly, the impossible postures seen in the Mannerist compositions by Parmigianino and others with noses and toes turned in drastically opposite directions are extreme explorations of bodily awareness. In addition, images of bodies in contact cue the viewer to construct and interact mentally with these spheres of volume. This is particularly the case in depictions in which the Madonna is shown touching, embracing, and restraining the Christ child. Writ large, the interaction of bodies is not only an exercise in composition, but a means to convey 'information about body temperature, pulse, texture, volume and weight which encourage multi-sensory imagining and enhance the impression of life-likeness' (p. 116).

One of Quiviger's most intriguing applications of this observation occurs in his section on thermoreception. Nativity Scenes where Christ or John the Baptist is washed and swaddled or bathing scenes in general (we might also think of the shivering figures in Masaccio's frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel) register the body's reception of thermal ambience. But Quiviger's suggestion could also be taken up to consider monumental depictions of the nude. Bronzino's portrayal of a calm reclining St Lawrence (S. Lorenzo, Florence) in the midst of an agitated crowd in contorted poses might not only be a means of displacing torment upon those surrounding the saint.[2] The martyr's tranquil disposition could also be a means of representing his coolness, his resistance to the burning grill, while the surrounding muscular nudes register the torrid heat via their turbulent movements.

While touch may be the most complex of the senses, smell and sound also figure in depictions of the human figure, though these often occur literally on the margins of pictorial representations. Quiviger notes that pleasant scents and conversely stench are frequently signalled via the scattering of flowers and actors squeezing their noses next to decaying bodies. One wonders if the depiction of this olfactory sense on the margins, be it in the form of Lorenzo Lotto's putti scattering flowers or the man bent over and holding his nose in Marcantonio Raimondi's *Morbetto*, is a testament to artists' uneasy relationship to depicting this sense. Furthermore, it is precisely in such marginal spaces that artists took the license to be most inventive and captivating. This certainly applies to the motif of the tuning figure, the subject of Quiviger's chapter on sound. While the tuning figure constituted the main 'subject' in Baroque paintings such as those by Caravaggio and his followers, in earlier depictions such as in Venetian altarpieces, tuning angels inhabit the bottom of compositions. As Quiviger points out, these tuning figures alluding as they do celestial harmony and sonic symmetries also serve to make engaging contact with the viewer. Most provocatively, Quiviger points out that tuning angels, like those figures reacting to smell, depict what cannot be depicted, the surrounding air. The tuning figures' locations in an ambient in which they harmonise their instruments produce a continuous loop of anticipatory silence and music.

Given that the senses rarely occur in isolation from one another, Quiviger turns in his final chapter to banquets, 'an environment of polyphonic sensations' (p. 165). Quiviger sees in these elaborate events, often memorialised in gastronomic treatises, manifestations of Renaissance art theoretical terms that enjoyed wide currency. While the concept of *varietas* is often understood in terms of varying rhetorical figures or in images, varying bodily poses, this term has sensuous applications in the field of music and food. Thus, Cristoforo da Messisburgo in his treatise *Banchetti* (1549) stresses that importance of the variety and copiousness of foodstuffs for banquets. Even the concepts of imitation and antithesis play a role in these festive gatherings. Foodstuffs alluded to polar opposites (rabbit patés shaped in the form of lions) while tableware such as ewers through their sinuous curves alluded to the act of pouring water and wine.

An implication we might draw from Quiviger's exposition concerns the sensorium's fleeting nature. It is no surprise, after all, that ephemeral decoration (from triumphal arches made of food to singing tableaux vivants) was an artistic medium which particularly engaged the operation of all five senses. But given the senses' transience, the beholder is forced to confront a hermeneutical task whose results necessarily rest on shaky temporal ground. What we are dealing with is interpretation that resides in the *moment* of perception, a moment that, due to its impermanence, complicates efforts to decipher its significance. We could

also posit that, due to volatile nature of the senses, the viewer at least in the domain of static images is in turn entangled in a position of suspension. For when we witness a touching hand that will inevitably lose its grasp or the consumption of grapes soon to disappear, we too are drawn into that singular instance in which the senses are temporarily engaged. Does the fleeting experience of the senses expose the beholder to an awareness of his eventual disintegration? One wonders whether this complex relationship with time accounts for the relegation of sensuous depiction and in contrast, the privileging of historical narrative with its enduring emotions and moral truths.

Whereas Quiviger's book raises questions about the early modern conception of the sensorium as a whole, John Varriano's study deals with the sense of taste, specifically with the possible 'plays of sympathy' between art and cuisine. The inquiry is broken down in three thematic sections. Part I ('Parallels in Food and Art') begins with an exploration of the social status of professional cooks and artists, followed by a discussion of the various stylistic and culinary characteristics in the Italian peninsula. Part II ('Images of Food in Art') considers the representations of comestibles in banqueting scenes, still-life, and religious narrative painting. Part III ('Food in the Studio, Art at the Table') examines the exchange of ingredients in kitchens and artists' studios; the function of the ornamented tableware; and finally, the ephemeral and edible decorations, often designed by artists of the calibre of Giambologna and Bernini, which formed part of the festival apparatus so crucial to promoting the cultural and political propaganda at court.

It is a commonplace to say that this era witnessed the rise of the artist from craftsman to intellectual. Did chefs enjoy a similar appreciation in status? In answering this question, Varriano compares treatises on painting with those dealing with cookery. Works such as Scappi's *On the Art of Cooking* and Vasari's *Lives* represent the early modern impulse to collect the knowledge of their respective worlds within the confines of a single encyclopedic book. But both works highlight and commemorate the 'virtuosity of creative performance', be it a banquet consisting of fifty dishes, twenty-seven desserts and scented toothpicks, or the plethora of contorted bodies in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*. Scappi compares a master cook to a 'judicious architect', while Vasari recounts in his Life of Rustici that Andrea del Sarto fabricated a replica of the Florentine Baptistery from jelly, sausages, cheese, pastry, sugar, marzipan, and peppercorns. Most significantly, portraits of cooks appear in approximate tandem with those of artists. And lest we think that artists were the only class of creative individuals to form academies, Varriano informs us that associations such as the *Accademia dei Vignaiuoli* served as forums for its vintner members to recite verse.

While the virtuosic performances of cooks and artists raise the question of their status in the social vertical hierarchy of professions, the parallels between gastronomy and the visual arts can also be considered in relation to the Italian peninsula's geography. In the light of the renewed interest in the field of *Kunstgeographie*, most notably represented by Thomas daCosta Kaufmann's seminal account of this art historical approach, Varriano asks how artistic and culinary practices emphasised geographic particularities, be they in the form of raw materials or native manners of working.[3] Classificatory schemes according to geography are a long-established convention in art literature. Vitruvius, for instance, lists those regions in Italy whose quarries have soft, medium, and hard stone. Likewise, the Roman architect also mentions that different areas of peninsula feature varying flavours of wine. Extending this analogy, Varriano observes that in Lecce, architectural ornament refers to the city's proximity to the sea, with depictions of fish scales and seashells encrusting the facades of churches and palaces. But while art literature often addresses the issue of geographic particularity, going so far as to adopt a polemical tone in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Varriano notes that culinary literature adopts a more ecumenical stance. To be sure, Platina in his *On Right Pleasure and Good Health* from the 1460s would state that 'we find some things better in one place than another', praising Campania for its grain or the Tusculan region for its figs and honey. But of the cookbooks published in 1557–1662, local delicacies account for only five per cent of the total number of recipes. Can one nevertheless posit a connection between geographic specificity, gastronomy, and the visual arts? To a certain degree, such a question rests on the assumption that artists, regional produce, and materials and cooks remain fixed and inert. Given that the early modern era was characterised by a great deal of mobility, the traffic in goods and individuals would necessarily complicate the answers to such a query. Ultimately, geographically informed approaches to culture ought not only to posit how place determines the production of art and cuisine, but also how personal activity works against the constraint of setting. What is at stake here is acknowledging the tension between human agency and determining factors. And yet, it seems more than coincidental that Bologna, renowned for its cuisine in earlier times as well as in the present era, was the site of 'gastronomic realism', most famously exhibited in Annibale Carracci's painting depicting a man consuming beans and the city's local delicacy, a *torta d'herbe*.

Varriano's speculations on regional cuisine and genre painting raise the larger issue of how one is to interpret the representation of food in works of art. Although art historians are inclined towards investigating the significance of learned iconography, we are less equipped to make sense of everyday subject matter, other than to characterise the contrast in terms of the opposition 'high' vs 'low'. We would do well to bear in mind the lesson of Zeuxis' grapes, which discusses the importance of illusionism in relation with *xenia*, or the still-life representation of comestibles. *Bodegónes*, the later variants of *xenia* executed by painters such as Cotán, stress not only realism but also spatial relationships between objects, various states of decay, and spirituality. But *bodegónes* also explore the sensation of

deprivation. Velazquez's *Water Sellers*, for instance, may well evoke thirst, not an uncommon sensation given the frequency of drought in Madrid throughout the seventeenth century.

Aside from prompting meditative contemplation of the senses or the topology of visual forms, the representation of comestibles participates in the effect of narrative compositions. From the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden to Belshazzar's banquet, the partaking of food and drink has coincided with several of the most pivotal moments in Biblical history. While we might focus on the drama of the apostles reacting to Christ's words in depictions of the Last Supper, the presence of foodstuffs on the table also serves as an occasion for artists to insert a degree of local specificity to these grand narrative scenes. Zanino di Pietro's rendering of the subject in San Polo di Piave in the Veneto shows the local delicacies of crawfish and white wine. Leonardo's apostles in Santa Maria delle Grazie are offered grilled eel, recipes for which abounded in Renaissance cookbooks. Such engagement with the beholder could easily cross the boundaries of decorum, as in the dwarfs and parrots in Veronese's *Feast in the House of Levi*. This license was especially acute in scenes with food carrying an erotic charge, with cucumbers, sausages, peaches, and cocks conveying a double meaning. As some foods were thought to increase libido, their pictorial representation may have served to arouse the sexual appetite and facilitate procreation.

In the last section of his book, Varriano discusses how food might serve as a bridge between the apparently distinct realms of the studio and kitchen, artwork and tableware, monumental architectonic structures and gastronomic displays. For instance, although 'egg tempera on panel' is a common technical description, one rarely pauses to think that yolks were ingredients for both cooking and painting. But more than one passage in Cennini's handbook for artists makes use of culinary analogies, such as when the painter is instructed to stir egg whites for bole with a whisk 'as if you were beating spinach or a purée'. Honey, salt, and almond gum were other ingredients present in kitchen and studio. Furthermore, as the shift in painting binding agents from egg tempera to oil occurred, early modern Europe witnessed a 'Renaissance' of the use of oil in the dining room as well. Whereas the use of pork fat in the Middle Ages distinguished Christians from Muslims, Varriano sees the revival of olive oil as part and parcel of the interest in all things antique in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This era also provides a number of fascinating instances of artists' consumption of foodstuffs. Our awareness of the eating habits of Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Pontormo force us to question anew the entrenched notion of the Renaissance artist as dry intellectual. Reflection on the artist's physical organism, on his tongue and stomach, might heighten our understanding of the working artist's conception of his own selfhood.

Though the principal element of a meal, food itself constituted but one part of Renaissance eating rituals. From the medieval convention of eating, an act that involved bare hands and trenchers (plates made out of dried bread), Varriano sees a shift to dining, an elaborate affair that involved sumptuous napkins, dishes made of valuable metals, and cutlery designated for the use of every guest. Whatever one might think of this distinction between the 'rough' Middle Ages and the 'refined' Renaissance, it is the case that the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw the increasing production of maiolica lusterware decorated with scenes culled from Biblical and mythological imagery. The all-important category of narrative painting did not just occur in frescoes or tapestries. Plates and vessels such as the pieces making up Francesco Xanto's famed Pucci service featured erudite subject matter whose forms often cited imagery from monumental painting. But what were the implications of having a maiolica plate transport recondite imagery from high up upon the frescoed wall to the more intimate space of the dining table and the eater's hand? As an in-between medium, maiolica calls attention to the gaps between the triumvirate of painting, sculpture, and architecture, condensing these three media into a dense moment of reception. In addition to thinking about how erudite tableware might have stimulated learned conversation, one might also consider how the presence of food interacted with the painted figural background in the recesses of plates, thus adding another layer of significance to be entertained by the informed viewer.

Though destined for a wide readership, the works by Quiviger and Varriano will also be welcomed by specialists. Will we reach a point where asking how works of art trigger the sensorium will become as common as considering authorship, context, and function? Both books call for considering the merit of taking a 'sensuous' approach in the field of early modern art.

Notes

1. 'The Theory of Figurative Expression in Italian Treatises on the *Impresa*' in Robert Klein, *Form and Meaning: Essays on the Renaissance and Modern Art* (Viking Press: New York, 1979), pp. 3–24.

2. Stephen Campbell, 'Bronzino's *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*. Counter Reformation Polemic and Mannerist Counter Aesthetics', *RES*, vol. 46, 2004, pp. 99–121.

3. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2004).

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Tahiti Revisited

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